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Proactivity in a career as a strategy of the intentional construction of an individual future in the world oriented toward a global change

Agnieszka Cybal-Michalska

Adam Mickiewicz University, ul. Wieniawskiego 1, 61-712 Poznań, Poland

Abstract

Global transformations of the contemporary world have a multidimensional character. These transformations touch almost all aspects of social existence. They seem inevitable and their complexity is hard to capture. It is really difficult to overestimate the meaning of these changes for the quality of career construction, its course and the modification of its individualized paths. The contemporary study of career makes it necessary to include the multicontextual changes in the world of work, that make employees face new requirements. The most important changes include the increase in the role of career and the ability to plan, manage and monitor one's own career in a lifelong perspective. Studies in the subject of career development in the world of "boundaryless" careers, in the world where "a career makes a career", emphasize the fact that, there is a shift in responsibility for shaping one's career from an organization to an individual and the basic feature of post-organizational era is the orientation to proactivity (as commitment that results from conditions, needs and contextual circumstances), that becomes the basis for an individual's mobility in a career. It means a specific shift of individual's orientation from external conditions of existence to the internal ones. All of these processes make us consider career as an individual's "property" – an individual as an agent that makes changes in a surrounding reality in the desired direction.

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1. Introduction

Postmodern, ambiguous and ambivalent socio-cultural reality, that gives in to constant fluctuations, leads to radical social changes that are expressed in permanent self-creation [1]. Striving for balance, as well as struggle and tension in social structures are their agential force. Strictly global discourse on the determinants of changes in the social system and the condition of a contemporary man, living in a heterogeneous global structure constitutes

considerations in the domain of planning, development and monitoring one's career in accordance with the orientation which is meaningful and valid in a given society.

The specificity of qualitatively new transformations in the relationship between globality and locality, a country and a society, a society and an individual and the links between them are relevant for the organization of the socio-cultural, political and economic life [2]. As Z. Bauman affirms, the rules of the free market are the prime movers of the new world (dis)order. Those rules have dominated politics, have gone beyond the transnational space, allowing the growing importance of economics and they have constricted the freedom of countries and governments in their decision-making [3]. This Polish thinker was not alone in his views on market expansion and commercialization. A. Toffler, D. Bella, R. Cooper, J. Naisbitt, M. Castells and A. Giddens think the same. U. Beck in the preface to his book entitled *Power in the Global Age (Władza i przeciwwładza w epoce globalnej. Nowa ekonomia polityki światowej)*, clearly emphasizes that nowadays, a certain disintegration takes place that is caused from the inside; this is disintegration of the <<valid>> order of the world, which was dominated by nation-states [4]. Although, you cannot take this view uncritically as a fully free market functions as an ideology, a myth or a model, but never as an everyday reality [5], as I. Wallerstein emphasizes that, there is no doubt that everyday life teaches us not to pin our hopes on the country, its politics or its society when we think of improving an individual life. The world of multiplicity and diversity, that is *in statu nascendi* (and that we experience and that has to be permanently examined) does not have such an ambition. This is the world of individually developed and implemented strategies that have to be adequate to the pace of changes taking place in the world [6]. Pointing out the quality of the global "cultural ecumen" (U. Hannerz) makes us think about global changes in life styles, which is relevant for the changes taking place in the world of work and practice of career planning and career management [7].

As a result of these transformations, we pay attention to: the quality of the system of work organization (work flexibility allows an individual to react adequately to the demand on the job market), the growing importance of the quality of job satisfaction (often through the change of its function or content), gradual disappearance of a traditional career development model [8]. The dynamics of changes in the contemporary world of work, or even "end of work" (J. Rifkin) updates the role of the quality of education and required qualifications. The following statement illustrates the outlined changes on the highly competitive and demanding job market: short-term projects become more common than a job in one company for a fixed period of time (...) and multi-skilling becomes a critical and decisive phenomenon [9]. Global tendencies and differentiation processes, multi-contextuality, multi-dimensionality and interdependence of various aspects of social life, undoubtedly, update the problem of idea implementation of *life-long learning*, planning, management, development and shaping of one's career and they make us reflect on the career as an individual's "property".

2. Career as an individual's "property" – about the need of proactivity

In the contemporary, individualized society, that creates new life styles, "a new way of thinking about career" becomes a fundamental issue (W. Lanthaler). The conceptualization of a qualitatively new approach to the problem of a career as an individual's "property", (coexisting with the traditional understanding of a career as a structural property of an organization or a given profession) points to a multidimensional character of a contemporary discourse that combines implications of an interdisciplinary dialogue and creates the need for a review of the theoretical afterthought on the ways of understanding a career, as well as conditions and determinants of its development.

Trying to better define the conceptual category of "a career", it is hard not to notice the vagueness and ambiguity of the semantic senses assigned to that term. Moreover, a characteristic feature of thinking about a career is a variety of meanings, in which the term is used. The notion of "a career" can be its subjective and objective semantic structure, evaluative (also in a negative sense, like "a careerist", "careerism" [10]) and non-evaluative (career as an individual's "property") understanding or capturing the problem from the perspective of an organization or an agent.

Career can be discussed as a social phenomenon. Capturing this phenomenon from a sociological perspective, career ethos is closely connected with values recognized in a society. It is omnipresent in its culture and through a transmission path, it is located and strongly rooted in the social awareness. Undoubtedly, this ethos is socially promoted which is relevant for targeting human activities. People meet with social approval, when they strive to achieve it [11]. At the margins of the considerations, there is a reference to the historical context of this

phenomenon. The triumph of capitalist relations is a significant source of creative “career-making” individual force. According to Z. Bauman, this thesis is perfectly justified as after the fall of structures of a feudal society, for the first time, a man: “gets back on one’s feet (...), depending on one’s own initiative and cleverness. For the first time, nothing in their position was obvious and given once and for all” [12]. Since then, a society has become an area for an individual initiative, a space without a limit for creation, a bank full of possibilities, chances and perspectives that are available to everyone who is oriented toward them. Another peculiarity of the outlined social conditions is the indication of the fact, that only in these conditions, one can talk about “a career”, not “vertical mobility” which has longer tradition than capitalism. As Bauman puts it, only in the ethos of capitalism, we notice that “career makes career” [13]. Bauman’s thesis that <<individual vertical mobility>> is transformed into a social problem of career (...) when social positions of individuals are not, once and for all, legally regulated, when individuals in their striving to achieve a certain place in a society are left to depend just on themselves. Thus, social climbing becomes ideology that stimulates thousands and millions of people to take action” [14]. Bauman’s thesis is in harmony with the perspective adopted by psychologists today, that treat career as an individual’s “property”. As B. G. Glaser and A. L. Strauss emphasize, individuals “<<wander>> between statuses, which are co-created by their co-operations and interactions with others. As a feedback they get the confirmation of their imaginings about themselves and their identity.” [15]. It is an important step to notice the subjective aspects of a career, such as: an individual’s status, the concept of oneself or social reactions to role play. It means that individuals are not recognized as “stable”. Ego that is relational and that is created in the socialization processes is rather “the multiplicity of realities, not one reality”. Seeing career as “an individual’s property” (Y. Baruch – 2004, A. Bańka – 2005) means accepting an individualistic assumption about an unrepeatable quality of each man’s career, as a career is “a series of unique posts, jobs, positions and professional experience” [16] and an agent’s responsibility for the construction of one’s career. The processual character is a characteristic feature of career.

B. Arthur, K. Inkson and J. K. Pringle pay attention to the assumption that accumulated values creating career competence, are also useful in the career development and they form the career capital. One has to emphasize here clear subjective shading of this conceptual category. It means that the career capital (which may increase but also decrease in value, as well as be exchanged to “new” capital) is a concept reflecting diagnosis and prognosis of accumulated human resources in an individual’s mind [17] gained thanks to educational, professional, social and cultural experience. As a result, accumulated career capital contributes to the coverage “for the future returns on investment (...) may provide payment in the form of security, satisfaction, socio-economical status, long-term employment or autonomy” [18].

Problematising the issue of career development in the world of “boundaryless” careers, in the world where “a career makes career”, one accentuates the fact that there is a shift of responsibility for career from an organization to an individual and the main feature of the post-organizational era is the orientation toward proactivity (as involvement resulting from conditions, needs and contextual circumstances), which becomes the foundation of an individual’s career mobility and this means a shift in an individual’s orientation from the outside conditions of existence to the inner conditions. This makes us consider career as an individual’s “property” - an individual as an agent making changes in the surrounding reality in a desired direction. Paths of development of individuals are shaped by experience. The experience may also be particularly important for creating a pattern of development [19], including a career pattern. There is no doubt that, while analyzing individual career development paths, one should take into account a wide range of an individual’s conditions and investigate semantic meanings that individuals give to the reality in order to interpret and understand past and new experience. On the one hand, individuals create and develop “one’s development and personality context, that is a social or institutional environment, on the other hand – they are strongly subjected to the pressure of their environment, that is its existing barriers, affordances (potential possibilities) and encouragement” [20]. In case of career capital, unlike social or cultural capital, one pays special attention to personality as a) a commercial value being “a subject of a potential transaction to other forms of capital; b) recreated, that is a modified value “from the point of view of assumptions made in advance”, c) a value that is deliberately constructed and developed by agents who take into account time dynamics [21]. Thus, we may come to a conclusion that the contribution of a developmental theory in the recognition and interpretation of peculiarities in a human life cycle and in a personality development in reference to the conceptualization of the cognitive field which is an individual’s career development (whether it refers to the whole, to the most important part or to the majority of

determinants or components of the object of cognition), as well as the phenomenon of investment and renewal of the career capital is difficult to overestimate. The immanent characteristic of the renewal of career capital is continuous development oriented toward proactivity.

The contemporary kind of careers in the times of “boundaryless careers” has its impact on the psychosocial and behavioral attitude of individuals, “whose life goal is professional activity (the fundamental characteristic of mental health), and not professional inactivity (the fundamental characteristic of social exclusion)” [22]. As Amudsen puts it, it is common knowledge that people make sense of the world of work thanks to subjective interpretation of one’s own career experience [23]. In the situation where no career scenario that is accepted *a priori* guarantees success, it is necessary for an individual to invest in a career that is identified as an individual’s “property”. As A. Bańka emphasizes, the dynamics of contemporary careers, called “boundaryless careers”, imposes proactive career planning and management [24]. That is the inseparability of career and life that Wolfe and Kolb (1980) noticed. However, their views were presented in 1980s, there is no basis – taken into account the dynamics and the pace of changes – there is no reason to assume that the definition of career development is no longer valid in the times when “career makes career” (Z. Bauman). They acknowledged that career development refers to the whole life, not just work. Thus, it refers to the overall life of an agent in constantly changing contexts of life. Environment pressure and limitations, as well as obligations that attach individuals to other important people, responsibility for children and for aging parents, the whole structure of circumstances – these are all factors that need to be understood and taken into account. In this respect, career development and personal development are interconnected. The self and circumstances – evolving, changing, revealing in mutual interaction – create the focus and drama of career development [25]. The distinguished definition that is dynamic in character (individual-environment, continuity and change) sheds additional light on the discussed issue. The conclusion is that a career construct focuses on a lifelong development of an individual. It is a process of identity formation not only in the relation to the world of work, but also “to the world in a man and a man in the world” (I. Wojnar).

The issue of career capital, understood as accumulated competence inclines us to think about the problem of the quality of career competence, that includes the aspect of proactivity. The issue of career competence (described also as “talents” and “skills” in the literature) as a basic activity of an agent has not become marginalized. On the contrary, it seems to be particularly valid in the context of changes of the contemporary world, including the world of work, where the process of lifelong learning and the ability to change qualifications become a necessity. Career competence are “the basic elements of a general employment ability, expressed in terms, such as <<know why>>, <<know how>>, <<know who>>” [26].

Multiplicity, fragmentarization, changeability and complexity of forms of social organization and their influence on the quality of career formation make it reasonable to raise a question about the essence of a process connected with career perspective planning and specifying: if and how individuals can be prepared to “build” their career and experience the satisfying self and their place in the reality? In this sense, for example, a new job seen from the perspective of the problem of career capital may be “a source of inspiration (know why), expertise (know how), new connections and interpersonal relations (know who)” [27]. These threads provoke thoughts about the aspect of dynamism in the modern career competence, showing the essence, importance and the meaning of competence and their permanent development in assessing the dynamics of the job market and career perspective planning. Career competences are not “final”, there is history ahead of them as career seems to be a change in the relation between individuals and their life, as well as professional activities – increased desire for satisfaction from smaller and bigger tasks, planning and achieving goals in the nearest and distant future, paying more and more attention to one’s own professional activities and the quality of life, success and gratification [28]. Striving for satisfaction connected with achieving better and better qualitative levels in the sphere of professional activities of individuals is, undoubtedly, linked with constantly developed competences and their meaning. Without question, to specify the quality of the required competences, requirements of the dynamic job market are the most important ones. The changes that can be seen there reflect the changing conditions of career development [29]. Paraphrasing Z. Bauman’s words and referring them to the phenomenon of career, one has to propose a thesis that the need to construct, modify and update career “connects all inhabitants of this busy world, while the ability to satisfy this need, even just minimally, divides them or, perhaps even, polarizes the social system” [30]. The difference comes from the quality of the proactive orientation, that is exemplified by “career competence”.

The identification of competence needed to “construct career” (Savickas) becomes necessity. Surely, the transformative context of the changes in the career development and resulting from this fact, as A. Bańka puts it, the lack of distinct “competence markers” allowing to develop an effective career, does not make this task any easier.

A lot of theoreticians and career researches propose structuralisation of career competence problem, while recognizing complexity and integrity of its components. V. Stanišauskienė (2004) pays attention to the basic range of this issue. The career competence is perceived as a set of skills relevant to the quality of changes of the modern world of work and employment policy that can be accomplished in practice [31]. A complementary belief about career competence was formulated by Lauzackas (1997). He believes that competence refers to knowledge, abilities, skills which make effective communication between an individual and the surrounding world become the demonstration of effective action, the ability to accomplish assigned tasks in real or hypothetical situations at work. [32].

The key aspect of the above convictions is the belief that we need to specify a model of career competence, that would clarify sets of abilities in chosen spheres. Corresponding competences would be components of the integral career competence. V. Stanišauskienė (2004) covered the distinguished belief in a multicontextual way. The cognitive effect of the author’s research was the distinction of components of the integral career competence, which constitutes a combinations of competence, such as: learning, professional, personal and social competence. Lifelong learning process, associated with the development of individual skills, stimulates the development of agents’ personality, specifies their identity, accompanies the process of self-education and the process of development of self-didactic abilities which prove that a given individual exhibits learning competence. This ability is necessary in active partnership and cooperation in the modern world in the reality of predominant rivalry. From the pragmatic-concretizing perspective, the main aim of this rivalry is development and perfection shown in practical activities. In isolation from the learning competence, the development of social, personal, and professional competence seems impossible. The professional competence is a group of skills that accompanies and favours understanding the world of employment, identifying and negotiating problems, analyzing the situation deeper, setting goals, looking for ideas to make a good decision, to plan, reflect and make self-assessment [33]. This professional competence is embodied by organizational skills and an ability to plan particular activities – both professional and general ones, linked with the shape of one’s life. According to the author, personal competence includes the following features: self-sufficiency, proactivity, flexibility, self-awareness, self-presentation and the development of one’s own image. The personal competence property is an agent’s ability to be engaged in “a dialogue with time”, retreating into oneself in search of answers to these questions: who was I?, who am I?, who am I becoming?, who can I be in future? The personal competence enables to clarify the relation between an agent and the surrounding world, it encourages to develop the feeling of authorship in an agent. It also encourages agents to be responsible for their choices resulting from one’s own preferences. Thus, this competence is essential in planning one’s career perspective. Social competence is defined as an ability to negotiate requirements of social life. Looking at the aspect corresponding with an object of the relation, it is described as an ability to communicate and cooperate, to be proficient in complicated social relations, an ability to work with other people, to understand and respect their interests, an ability for individual learning [34]. The following features are mentioned as the ones that prove social competence of an agent: communicativeness, tolerance, self-sufficiency, self-criticism and self-confidence [35]. Assuming interrelation between the distinguished spheres of career competence, the following thesis may be proposed that it is not a set of elements but the whole system which is instrumental in nature. Presented considerations correspond with the category of “career portfolio” created by Ch. Hardy. The career portfolio, being a tool of sustainability of career capital is “a set of individuals’ investment shares included in career plans, (...) it is a planned source of competence that are to have measurable commercial value on the job market.” [36].

3. Conclusion

To sum up, it should be emphasized that the vision of the world of continual fluctuations, ideas undermining the existence of the career competence “once and for all” emphasize the need to focus attention on the subject of “the competence development”. The development of career competence is a sort of requirement concerning human condition that is relevant for the shape of social order. It is a continuous process, in which agents gain new skills and improve the ones they already have. Within the analyzed construct, J. Kirby formed his views (1999); he names the following important attributes of career competence: a) application (employment at a specific time and in specific situations), b) continuity (lifelong employment and improvement, including getting a profession and continual professional development), c) adaptability (the development of required competence, the most essential on the changing job market), d) availability (access to conditions necessary for development), e) flexibility (their character makes it possible to transfer them – gained competence can be used in practice, <<transfer>> them to a new situation) [37]. The key criterion of proactivity in behaviour is individuals’ anticipation about their career future and creating their future results, which will influence not only individuals but also their environment. In this sense, proactive career behaviours encompass actions oriented toward a specific goal. Individual responsibility for being an agent and for being responsible for one’s own career is the essential issue here. Multitude, fragmentarization, changeability and complexity of forms of social life determine changes in the perception of career development and overcoming tension between past experience and future possibilities. An individual as an conscious, proactive creator of one’s biography takes part in processes of “investing and renewing” the career capital.

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